

Research on the health benefits of pet therapy has been widely publicized. When used in a therapeutic environment, pets have been shown to decrease blood pressure, ease pain or anxiety and enhance both short and long-term memory. Psychological benefits include building a rapport with healthcare providers, decreasing stress, and improving self-esteem and motivation.

Northridge Hospital is finding that the pet visitation program is especially beneficial to pediatric patients who are often frightened by their hospitalization and may miss their own pet at home. In fact, pet therapy dogs can serve as a useful distraction when a reluctant pediatric patient must undergo medical testing. Recently, a nurse was having a difficult time taking a young patient's blood pressure so she requested a pet therapy visit. "Petting the dog was a wonderful distraction for the young lad," recalls Ginny. "I feel like we get as many blessings as we give when we bring the dogs to patients."



Orthopedic patient **Irinea Ruelas** of North Hollywood is delighted to receive a visit from Wizzard, one of 10 pet therapy dogs at Northridge Hospital whose mere presence can alleviate pain, anxiety and stress.



Michael Lee is delighted to receive a visit from pet therapy dog Molly. Stroking a dog can facilitate range of motion in the upper extremities of spinal cord injury patients.

Since pet therapy can be particularly advantageous for patients who have suffered a stroke or traumatic brain injury, the **Center for Rehabilitation Medicine** provides inpatients with a special opportunity to interact with trained pets. Therapists use a weekly formalized pet therapy program to improve a patient's memory, attention, verbal expression, and social interaction. Visits from the four-legged friends can even encourage patients to use their hands to stroke their soft fur, take a walk or speak.

"Pet therapy is especially beneficial to our patients with speech deficits," explains Speech Therapist **Allison Abramson, MS, CCC-SLP**. "The pets engage these patients who are often uncommunicative or reserved, helping to facilitate speech. And, our patients will often remember the pets' names, which is a great memory activity." Allison also says the pet visitation provides a relaxed atmosphere for patients, making them more comfortable and more likely to interact with the therapists and each other.

Consider spinal cord injury patient **Michael Lee**, who owns a computer consulting business. During his lengthy stay, he began missing his own dogs, Gizmo and Cinnamon. When he received a visit from Molly, a vivacious Golden Retriever, he was thrilled. "Having the dogs visit brings me comfort and joy – the same joy my own dogs bring," he says. "Seeing them makes me smile and I feel that sense of unconditional love that only animals can bring."

John Alfenito, co-coordinator of Paws That Refresh, agrees, "The dog visits bring a sense of normalcy into an abnormal situation. When a dog visits a patient, it's like being home for five minutes."

For more information about the volunteer pet program **Paws That Refresh**, please call 818-885-8500, ext. 2782. Northridge Hospital also offers several other opportunities to volunteer throughout the facility. For information on volunteer programs, please call 818-885-8500, ext. 2961. For more information on the Rehabilitation programs at NHMC, please visit our website at www.NorthridgeHospital.org.

Howling About Pet Therapy Benefits

Northridge Hospital is one of many medical centers nationwide with a volunteer pet visitation program, which greatly contributes to the emotional and physical healing process. Pet therapy is proven to:

- decrease blood pressure
- ease pain or anxiety
- improve both short- and long-term memory
- encourage social interaction
- enhance communication with healthcare providers
- decrease stress
- improve self-esteem and motivation
- encourage stroke or traumatic brain injury patients to use their hands, take a walk or even speak